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18 November 1981*William F. Buckley Jr.*

'Alarming, Given the Source'

In the August issue of *Encounter* magazine, the author Robert Elegant wrote a long piece called "A Reporter Looks Back at the Vietnam War." This is not, though it might frightfully be just that, a report in turn on Elegant's report. Rather, it is a report on a reaction to it so alarming, given the source, as to raise serious questions about the balance of key American media personnel.

What Elegant said in his long essay was that the time had come to review the implications of the job done by the press in reporting the Vietnam War. He believes that the reporting by the press had consequences arguably so critical as actually to dictate the course of the war.

It is a cliché that the Vietnam War was lost as a result of poor policy decisions, by the government primarily, as also by the military. But what was the role of the press in catalyzing such decisions?

We are all more or less familiar with the apparently endless furor caused by the American incursion into Cambodia in 1970. That furor is, really, a creature of the press. It dated back to inflamed reports on U.S. "escalation" and has evolved into the surrealistic notion that Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon were personally responsible for the death and mutilation of a couple of million Cambodians under Pol Pot.

Elegant, for instance, writes: "I believe it can be said (surprising as it may still sound) that South Vietnamese and American forces actually won the limited military struggle. They virtually crushed the Viet Cong in the South." Elegant goes on: "It is ... interesting to wonder whether Angola, Afghanistan and Iran would have occurred if Saigon had not fallen amid nearly universal odium—that is to say, if the 'Vietnam Syndrome' for which the press (my view) was largely responsible, had not afflicted the Carter administration and paralyzed American will."

Reports from Vietnam, often by correspondents who were unschooled in the issues at stake and insensitive to the nature of the contending passions, sometimes were written apparently "to win the approbation of other correspondents in that insidiously collegial atmosphere, (producing) reporting that was remarkably homogeneous. Reporting Vietnam became a closed, self-generating system sustained largely by the acclaim the participants lavished on each other in almost equal measure to the opprobrium they heaped on 'the Establishment,' a fashionably and very vulnerable target."

Elegant gives example after example. He cites the vulnerability of South Vietnamese corruption. He criticizes impartially the policies of John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. He cites the success of North Vietnamese intelligence penetration. He dwells on the huge differential in the passion generated by the Vietnam War, designed to contain the communists, and the transitory passion aroused by the awful slaughters, since presided over, in South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia by the men who won the war. The article is balanced, thoughtful, detailed, provocative, modest in tone, exploratory in mood.

Along comes CBS' Morley Safer. Since I know and like the gentleman, I go down on my knees hoping that he read, that morning in October on the CBS network, lines written for him by a young, thoughtless and ignorant fanatic. He referred to Robert Elegant as "the popular novelist." One might as well refer to Dwight Eisenhower as "a well-known amateur golfer."

Robert Elegant, who has written two novels, spent 25 years as a foreign correspondent, 20 of them in Southeast

Asia, and several years, cumulatively, in Vietnam. He was the principal area correspondent for *Newsweek* magazine and won several prizes for his work. He did graduate work in oriental studies at Yale University before going to Hong Kong.

Morley Safer then compared Elegant's article with the kind of thing Joseph Goebbels would have done. Three sentences later he brought up Goebbels again, and then decided that the article by Elegant was also "appropriate for a Soviet department of agitation and propaganda." He finished by saying that *Encounter* magazine—which, by the way, would appear on anyone's list of the top six journals published in English—once accepted CIA money, and perhaps Elegant was after "pieces of silver left from those dark days." The performance was shocking. Elegant's protest elicited from the head of CBS News the statement, "We see no basis for any request for response time."

The episode is at least as serious as any controversy over how to allocate the blame for the bloody fiasco in Vietnam. If such a reply is accepted as appropriate criticism, then civilized discourse, as the basis of democratic exchange, is dead.